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ABS releases Measures of Australia's Progress

Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP), released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) today, is an ABS contribution to the national discussion about whether life in Australia is getting better.

In 2002, the ABS released the first issue of Measures of Australia's Progress. More than two years in the making, the first issue was referred to in the media as 'about as close as any statistician can get to the meaning of life'. Late last year the ABS head - Dennis Trewin - topped the society category of The Bulletin's Smart 100 awards for the ground breaking work in producing the publication.

MAP presents 15 headline dimensions of Australian progress that cover many of the areas of life most important to Australia and Australians. Today's publication draws on ABS and other data to paint a picture of national progress over the past ten years. The publication updates and expands upon the first issue of MAP.

MAP 2004 shows:

Health: During the past decade, Australians' health improved - children born in 2001 were expected to live three years longer than those born in 1991. Indigenous Australians, however, have a life expectancy that is considerably lower than other Australians.

Education and Training: During the past 10 years, the Australian population became more educated - between 1993 and 2003 the proportion of people aged 25-64 years with a vocational or higher education qualification rose from 45% to 55%.

Work: Since the last recession in the early 1990s the unemployment rate has gradually declined, and in 2003 was 5.9%.

National income: Australia experienced significant real income growth during the past decade. Between 1992-93 and 2002-03, real net national disposable income per capita grew by around 2.8% a year.

Financial hardship: Between 1994-95 to 2000-01 the real income of 'less well-off' Australians grew by 8%. But the incomes of better-off groups increased by proportionally more.

National wealth: National wealth, as measured in Australia's balance sheet, grew during the 1990s. Real wealth per person increased by about 0.6% a year between 1993 and 2003.

Productivity: In recent years, Australia has experienced improved rates of productivity growth. During the decade 1992-93 to 2002-03, Australia's multifactor productivity rose 1.3% per year on average.

The natural landscape: Biodiversity cannot be measured comprehensively, however there is a concern that Australia's biodiversity has declined in the past decade partly encapsulated in a rise in the numbers of threatened birds and mammals. Land clearance, one influence thought to be reducing biodiversity, decreased by about 40% between 1991 and 2001. The area of land protected in national parks and the like increased.

In 2000, about 5.7 million hectares of land were affected by, or at high risk of developing, dryland salinity, a widespread form of land degradation.

Detailed national time series data are not available, but a variety of partial evidence points to a decline in the quality of some of Australia's waterways. In 2000, about one-quarter of Australia's surface water management areas were classed as highly used or overused.

The human environment: Australia's air remains relatively clean by the standards of other developed nations. The available indicators, such as the incidence of fine particle pollution in several cities, suggest that Australian air quality has improved during the past decade, despite increased motor vehicle use.

International environmental concerns: Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions in 2001 were about 4% higher than they were in 1991. Per capita, we have one of the world's highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, although our per capita emissions are decreasing, as are our emissions per \$ of GDP. Our heavy reliance on fossil fuel burning for energy (rather than other forms of power like nuclear or hydro-electricity), the structure of our economy and the level of land clearing; are three influences behind our high emissions.

Crime: Though small, the changes in the prevalence rates for personal crimes between 1998 and 2002 showed an increase from 4.8% to 5.3%. Most of these people were assaulted. Between 1993 and 2002, there was little change in the proportion of households that were the victim of a household crime (an actual or attempted break-in or motor vehicle theft) and it remained at slightly less than 9%.

Housing; Oceans and Estuaries; Family, Community and Social Cohesion; and Democracy, Governance and Citizenship: While no headline indicators are presented for these four topics, each contains a commentary that discusses a range of information and indicators covering progress in each area.

MAP also includes an article on multiple disadvantage in Australia and one comparing Australia's progress with that in other OECD countries.

Commentary that accompanies the indicators discusses trends in progress together with differences within Australia and the factors influencing change. The aspects of national progress are linked with one another. Changes in one aspect will be associated with changes in many others - sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

Overall progress should not be assessed by simply counting the numbers of areas getting better and subtracting those getting worse. Some aspects of progress (especially aspects such as national income and national wealth) are more easily encapsulated in a small number of indicators, than are some social and environmental aspects of progress. Some readers of MAP will give greater importance to some aspects of progress than to others.

Supplementary commentaries provide more information about the headline indicators. They discuss other aspects of national progress including: Culture and Leisure; Inflation; Competitiveness and Openness; and Transport and Communication.

Why we produced MAP - by Dennis Trewin, Australian Statistician

Measuring a nation's progress - providing information about whether life is getting better - is one of the most important tasks that a national statistical agency can take on. For almost 100 years, the ABS has been measuring Australia's progress through the multitude of statistics we publish relating to Australia's economy, society and environment. However, for the most part, our statistical publications have tended to focus on each of these three broad areas in isolation.

Recent years have seen growing public interest in the interrelationships between economic, social and environmental aspects of life. There have been, for example, debates about the sustainability of economic growth and a recognition that the environment is neither an inexhaustible source of raw materials nor capable of absorbing an unlimited amount of waste. Similarly, progress relates to social concerns - such as health, education and crime - and whether and how economic growth benefits those areas.

Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP), is a publication which we hope will enhance discussion. MAP considers some of the key aspects of progress side-by-side and discusses how they are linked with one

another. This publication does not claim to measure every aspect of progress that is important. Nor does it consider all of the many different ways that parts of Australia and groups of Australians are progressing. But it does provide a national summary of many of the most important areas of progress, presenting them in a way which can be quickly understood. MAP will inform and stimulate public debate and encourage all Australians to assess the bigger picture when contemplating progress in all its forms.

Answering the question "Has life in our country got better, especially during the past decade?" is far from easy. Indeed there can be no definitive answer, because we all have our own views about what is most important to individual and national life. During the past four years, the ABS consulted a wide range of experts, organisations and individuals to understand what they saw as the most important aspects of national progress. This publication presents indicators relating to some of those aspects.

The ABS hopes that Australians will use these headline indicators to form their own views of how our country is progressing. In April 2002, the ABS published the first issue *Measuring Australia's Progress*, which provided a contribution to this discussion. It was an intentionally experimental publication and so we sought comments on the project. Much of the response to the publication was favourable, and this work is influencing similar initiatives around the world, in places like the United States and Ireland. There were some criticisms, mostly constructive, and we have made some adjustments to the publication in light of those criticisms. It was always our intention that the publication would evolve. This second edition of MAP incorporates a number of changes that strengthen the publication, including:

- A strengthened discussion of governance, democracy and citizenship, that uses a range of information to illustrate aspects of Australian life in this dimension, but does not assess overall progress.
- New material that paints a picture of the nation's families and communities and how they relate to social cohesion. This material goes beyond the information presented in MAP 2002, although, once again, we do not attempt to assess overall progress here.
- A more focussed discussion on progress in the financial hardship dimension.
- Combining several environmental progress dimensions into a new overarching dimension, The natural landscape, to better highlight the links between aspects of the Australian landscape.
- Elevating the Productivity dimension to headline status, to reflect its very important influence on Australia's economic performance, now and in the future.
- Including special articles that relate to, rather than measure, progress. Material about multiple disadvantage, and levels of progress in Australia and other OECD countries is included.

Many other changes have been made, including the title: the publication is now called *Measures of* - rather than 'measuring' - Australia's Progress, to ensure readers realise immediately that we are not claiming to have included everything that is important to progress in this country.

Plans for the future: The next issue of *Measures of Australia's Progress* is planned for 2005. The ABS hopes to build on this issue to improve the publication in the future, recognising that it will doubtless evolve: important measures of progress may have been omitted, people's views about progress will change, and new data will become available. The ABS invites readers' feedback on ways of enhancing the publication; seminars in most capital cities and other consultation processes are being established to gather such feedback.

More details are available on the ABS website in **Measures of Australia's Progress** (cat. no. 1370.0)

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